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ABSTRACT

This paper offers suggestions for teaching high school and college students about cultural diversity and for providing them with multicultural educational experiences. After presenting a background and rationale for such teaching, the paper gives a list of classroom activities, including student reactions to statements regarding racism and affirmative action and a video analysis exercise. Among the suggestions are that students write down their feelings and reactions to the video, then share what they have written in a class discussion, guided by the teacher. (CR)

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Encouraging Students to Analyze/Articulate their Beliefs about Cultural Diversity

Submitted to GIFTS (Great Ideas in Teaching)

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Encouraging Students to Analyze/Articulate their Beliefs about Cultural Diversity

I. Background and Rationale:

Why do we need to teach about cultural diversity or provide multicultural educational experiences?

There are several reasons:

1. There has been a consistent increase in acts of overt racism and racially motivated violence.

2. Demographic projections clearly indicate <u>increasing</u> diversity in the U.S. population. Estimates are:

   -By mid-1990's 1 in 3 will be students of color.

   -By 2000 1 in 3 of the total population will be persons of color.

   -By 2020 46% of the populations, ages 0-18 will be persons of color.

   Thus, we have an INCREASING number of white teachers working with an increasingly diverse student population.

3. Students need to be prepared for employment in an increasing diverse workplace.

4. What if we could shrink the earth's population to a village of exactly 100 - but maintain the existing human ratios? What would it look like?

   59 Asians
   14 Europeans (includes former Soviet Union)
   12 Africans
   8 South Americans (includes Carribean)
   5 North Americans
   1 Australian
   1 Oceanian

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   70 People of color
   30 White

70 Non-Christian
30 Christian

1 University graduate

The above information is adapted from:
"Fairness and Awareness: It's an Attitude" - Workshop presented by REACH Center, Seattle Washington 98109, in Decatur, Illinois, November 2, 1995).

Statistics: Bureau of the Census. U.S. Dept. of Commerce. 1994.

It is important for North American high school/college students to accurately conceptualize their relative place in a global economy. Seeing the "big" picture may help emphasize the need for both tolerance and understanding of other cultures.

II. Classroom Activities

A. I create a literal continuum on the floor in the front of my classroom by placing 5 sheets of paper on the floor in a line. Each sheet indicates a position on the continuum:

SA - Strongly Agree
A - Agree
N - Neutral, I'm not sure
D - Disagree
SD - Strongly Disagree

Then I read statements to my class and ask students to literally/publicly take a stand. Move to stand on the sheet of paper that best represents your feelings/beliefs.

Sample statements:

1. Racism in America is decreasing.

2. I support Affirmative Action.

3. A person must meet the minimum qualifications of the job to be hired under affirmative action guidelines.

4. Affirmative Action promotes reverse discrimination.

5. When I look at a person, I am not conscious of their color.

6. I am sometimes extra nice to persons of other races to show that I am not prejudiced.

7. Churches and religious organizations help to decrease racism.

8. Multicultural education should be included in the curriculum at all levels.

9. I am cautious and not totally comfortable around persons of another race.

After students have taken a stand, the 5 different clusters of students discuss why they are standing where they have chosen to stand. It is a good way of visually seeing where attitudes cluster in your classroom. It also allows students to debate with others standing at different points in the continuum. Rarely, if ever, is a student left standing alone. Most positions will have a small, medium, or large cluster of students occupying that spot. Thus, students will have support if they voice an opinion significantly different from majority. Students enjoy the activity and usually engage in vigorous debate.

B. Video Analysis

I have shown a 2-part episode of "Picket Fences" in class. This episode deals with school busing for the purposes of integration. While it is set in the 1990's, it parallels the Little Rock Central High School integration trauma of the 1950's. The premise is that Rome, Wisconsin is a small, primarily white town where people live to escape the violence of the inner city. An unpredictable African-American federal judge orders students from the inner city of Green Bay, WI to be bussed to Rome, WI to be given a "better chance" at a quality education. The parents react by seeking an injunction against this court order. That strategy fails. Then, they try to establish a private school in a church basement. As the crisis escalates, the female mayor is jailed for contempt and the national guard is sent to escort the African-American children into the school. Supposedly liberal parents are suddenly confronted with their own fears and prejudices as they try to circumvent the significant integration of the town's school system. The school system has been integrated for some time, but in small numbers, by nice, middle class African-American kids. The town fears large numbers of minorities and fears kids with an inner city gang background and exposure. As with all "Picket Fences" episodes, there are a number of impassioned characters and speeches. Hidden motivations of key characters are gradually revealed.

This video can be used as an analysis paper assignment in an interpersonal course, a communication theory course, or intercultural communication. I present students with a list of concepts/theories that we have previously studied in the course: nonverbal communication, conflict theories, uncertainty reduction theories, perception and attitude change theories, listening skills, self-concept, attribution theory, five types of racists

(active racist, passive racist, silent anti-racist, anti-racist, and paternalist), source credibility, groupthink etcetera. Students must then choose 5 theories and show how they are illustrated in the various character's lives or actions. (I also provide students with a list of character names, a synopsis of key scenes and summary of key sections of dialogue, so they do not have to take detailed notes during the video).

Another way to use the video is to ask students to engage in perspective-taking. Students must choose one of the characters they most dislike or disagree with (often the federal judge). They must then try to see the world through his or her eyes. If you were that person, what are your values? What motivates you? What do you believe in and what are you trying to accomplish? This is frequently a VERY tough thing for students to do, but very worthwhile. Only by engaging in perspective-taking can we come to understand the positions of others and rationally interact with them.

Finally, students can chart how their feelings and attitudes change throughout the episode. The instructor can stop the videotape at critical points and ask students to answer these questions:

1) Who do you most like in this episode or who do you feel the most affinity for? Why?
2) Who generates the most anger or frustration within you? Why?
3) What other feelings are you experiencing right now? Why?

As more information about character motivation is revealed, the answers to these questions usually change.

The above exercises engage the student in higher order thinking and are critically important methods of clarifying student positions about multicultural issues in our society.

C. The Invisible Aspects of White Privilege

(material adapted from Peggy McIntosh - Wellesley College Center for Research on Women)

McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," in Race, Class, and Gender.2nd ed. ed. by Margaret Anderson and Patricia Collins. Belmont: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1995.

Whites often think of racism as something that disadvantages others not as something that creates invisible advantages for them. Read several of the following statements to your students:

1. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

2. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

3. I can dress in second hand clothes or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the poverty or illiteracy of my race.

4. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

5. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

6. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race.

Then ask them to write down their feelings and reactions. Ask students to share what they have written and guide the class discussion. You can also ask the class to identify other examples of invisible privilege. Then ask them to consider: what is the next step? What do we do after the knowledge and awareness step?